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WILLIAM HAWKINS • MARCUS SCHUBERT • MARTINE LUSARDY • OUTLIERS

REAPPRAISING THE “OUTLIERS”

A new exhibition in Washington, DC, will examine the history of modern artists and modern-art museums' interest in the creations of talented autodidacts

EDWARD M. GÓMEZ

In recent years, an increasing number of galleries specialising in art produced by “professional”, schooled modern and contemporary art-makers have begun showing the creations of their self-taught peers. Similarly, some high-profile exhibitions at museums or other venues, primarily in the United States and Europe, have emphatically brought together works made by academically trained artists and those whose works have been classified as *art brut*, outsider art, or self-taught art.

For aficionados of art forms in those latter, related categories who consider themselves aesthetic purists, seeing such works displayed alongside those of “professional” artists in a way that seems to downplay or ignore the distinctions between them may seem curious. Is the goal of such presentations to validate the accomplishments of self-taught art-makers by placing them near “professional” artists’ works or maybe even to blur or dissolve any presumed category border between them?

With these concerns providing something of a backdrop and with other related themes in mind, “Outliers and American Vanguard Art”, a well-researched, insightful exhibition that will open on January 28, 2018, in the East Building of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, is sure to illuminate certain aesthetic and historical issues in the ongoing discussion of the relationship between the work of schooled and unschooled artists. (The exhibition will travel on to the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, Georgia, and then to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in California.)

Organised by Lynne Cooke, the National Gallery of Art’s senior curator of special projects in modern art, “Outliers” will investigate how modern and contemporary artists and art institutions in the United States regarded, presented, and sometimes embraced the work of self-taught artists from the early decades of the twentieth century through more recent times. The exhibition will argue that interest in – or even a certain fascination with – the ideas, art-making techniques and remarkable creations of self-taught artists on the part of their schooled

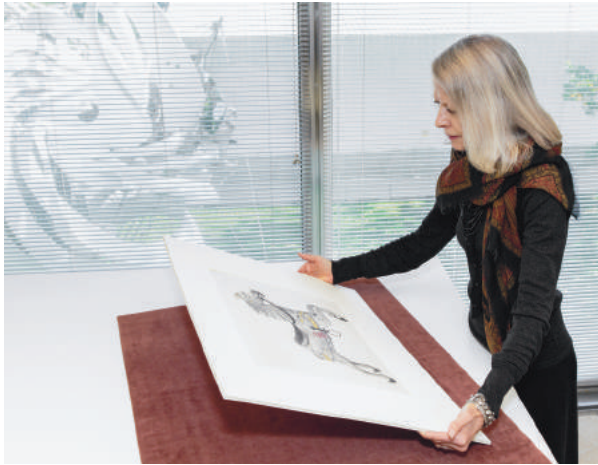
counterparts is nothing new, and that the history of this lively interaction between the creative expressions of trained and untrained art-makers is a subject that has been forgotten or overlooked.

“Outliers” will feature roughly 250 works of art produced by both schooled and unschooled artists, including, among others, William Edmondson, Henry Darger, Lonnie Holley, Sister Gertrude Morgan, Horace Pippin, Martín Ramírez, Judith Scott, Charles Sheeler, Matt Mullican, Betye Saar and Cindy Sherman. Looking specifically at the activities of American artists and institutions, it will highlight three periods during which the ideas and aesthetics of modernist avant-garde artists and outsiders intersected, and show how their encounters helped give rise to what Cooke refers to as “new paradigms based on inclusion, integration, and assimilation” between the two artistic camps.

In an interview at the National Gallery of Art, Cooke explained that she has used the term “outliers” to refer to the self-taught artists whose works will be featured in the exhibition because, “in the modernist paradigm, structured around a centre that has agency and a periphery that does not, it’s a one-way street.” However, she added, “Nowadays the paradigm has changed. Today we can recognise the self-taught artist as an outlier – as someone who is situated at a distance from the aggregate or norm, as opposed to a centre-periphery relationship. Instead, outliers are related in terms of shifting trajectories that might bring them nearer to or farther from this norm, in terms they may negotiate or seek to define.”

Cooke believes that the outliers of our time are not only self-taught artists but also individuals who are reshaping their relationships with what is “normal” in different ways and on their own terms in relation to race, gender, sexuality, and personal identity. In the exhibition’s catalogue, Cooke writes that “being at variance with the norm” can lead an individual to fashion or discover a “position of strength”, that is, “a place negotiated or sought out rather than predetermined and fixed.”

The three art-historical moments “Outliers” examines



left

Lynne Cooke, a curator at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, with *Carousel Horse* by George Constantine, c. 1939, photo by National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC

below

Joseph Yoakum, *Briar Head Mtn of National Park Range of Bryce Canyon National Park near Hatch, Utah U.S.A.*, c. 1969, ballpoint pen and coloured pencil, 20 × 24 ins. / 50.8 × 60.7 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, gift of the Collectors Committee and the Donald and Nancy de Laski Fund





above: Lonnie Holley, *The Boneheaded Serpent at the Cross (It Wasn't Luck)*, 1996, found metal, bones, dried flowers, overall: 21 x 18 x 9 ins. / 53.34 x 45.72 x 22.86 cm, Souls Grown Deep Foundation from the William S. Arnett Collection

top right: James "Son Ford" Thomas, *Untitled*, 1988, unfired clay, paint, human teeth, rocks, 6.75 x 4.5 x 7 ins. / 17.15 x 11.43 x 17.78 cm, Souls Grown Deep Foundation from the William S. Arnett Collection

right: William Edmondson, *Angel*, 1931, limestone, overall: 16.5 x 5.5 x 22 ins. / 41.91 x 13.97 x 55.88 cm, Robert M. Greenberg Collection



span the periods from 1924 to 1943, from 1968 to 1992, and from 1998 through 2013. During each one, Cooke's research shows, waves of social, political, and cultural upheaval in the United States stimulated artistic interchanges that defied or led to the elimination of certain traditional, long-standing hierarchies. (Examples: the feminist movement and sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, which forcefully challenged long-entrenched, male-privileged power structures.)

Cooke looked back on her time at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in Madrid, Spain, where she served as a curator several years ago. There, after working on exhibitions of the work of Ramírez (with guest curator Brooke Davis Anderson) and James Castle, and co-organising with the German contemporary artist Rosemarie Trockel a show featuring works by both trained

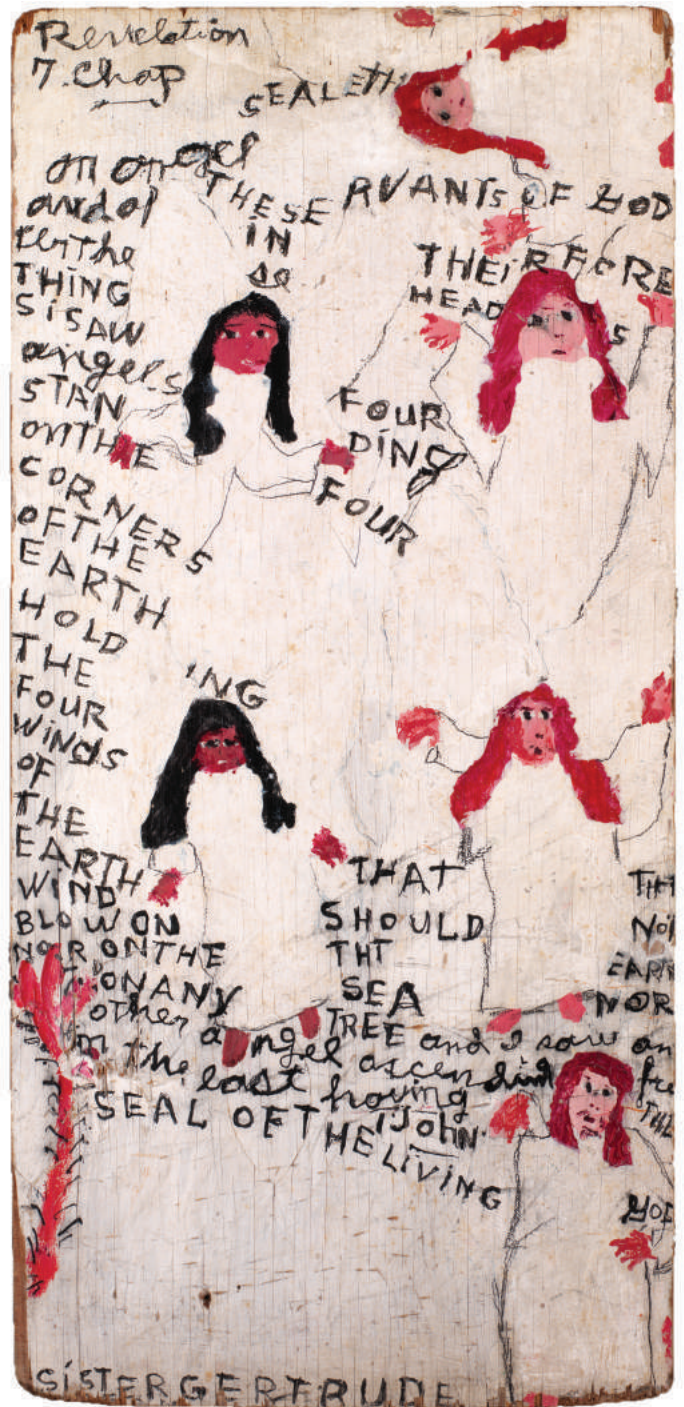
and self-taught artists, she began thinking about certain questions.

Cooke recalled, "I thought, 'What gets shown today in a museum of modern and contemporary art? Where are the borders? What are the margins?' I started to think about this in terms of what is seen as acceptable or inappropriate – by curators, audiences, and institutions themselves. One of these areas is that of work made by self-taught, uncredentialed artists."

However, she pointed out, at certain times in the past, "that wasn't the case"; in fact, she noted, among certain artists and in the programming of certain American museums "there was a porousness and reciprocity" in the way in which artworks made by schooled modern artists and by autodidacts was examined and appreciated. For example, the Precisionist painter-photographer Charles



above
Marsden Hartley, *Adelard the Drowned, Master of the "Phantom"*,
c. 1938–39, oil on board, 28 x 22 ins. / 71.12 x 55.88 cm, Frederick
R. Weisman Art Museum at the University of Minnesota,
bequest of Hudson D. Walker from the Lone and Hudson D.
Walker Collection



right
Sister Gertrude Morgan, *Untitled (Revelation 7. Chap.)*, c. 1965–70,
paint on wood, overall: 32.36 x 15.36 ins. /
82.23 x 39.05 cm, courtesy of The Museum of Everything

Sheeler (1883–1965), who had been in Paris as Cubism emerged in the early twentieth century, shared his enthusiasm for folk and vernacular art forms with the curatorial staff at New York's Museum of Modern Art (which was founded in 1929; its first director was Alfred H. Barr, Jr).

Cooke said that the exhibitions she developed at the Reina Sofía made her consider "whose work is shown in museums and why, and also how this fits into the discourse of our current moment about greater inclusiveness and diversity" in the cultural arena, education, the workplace, and other sectors of society. She noted that, today, these are urgent topics, even "in the contemporary-art world," but that in the more specialised outsider-art field, "maybe discussion of these issues of dissolving long-standing fixed categories has only begun to take place."

Thus, "Outliers" will bring together works by trained

and self-taught artists, not explicitly to equate them or to allow the former to help aesthetically legitimise or validate the latter (as, in the eyes of numerous observers, the main exhibition at the 2013 Venice Biennale appeared to do), but rather, as Cooke noted, to provoke a "more circumscribed conversation between the works on view."

Focusing on the period from 1924 to 1943, the first section of the exhibition will look at how such American modern artists as Sheeler and Yasuo Kuniyoshi (1889–1953) loaned examples of historic folk art from their personal collections to "Early American Art," a 1924 show at the Whitney Studio Club in New York (later the Whitney Museum of American Art). In the "Outliers" catalogue, Cooke writes, "[A]cross the century, professionally trained artists would pave the way by 'discovering' or recovering art by their unschooled counterparts. Becoming its most



Bill Traylor, *Men Drinking, Boys Tormenting, Dogs Barking*, c. 1939–42, opaque watercolour on card with dark grey prepared surface, 14.25 x 21.75 ins. / 36.2 x 55.25 cm, collection of Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz, promised gift to the Philadelphia Museum of Art

persuasive advocates, they embraced it without qualification.... [...] By including it without distinction alongside their own work in gallery and museum exhibitions, which they often curated themselves, they contested the power relations integral to modernist discourse."

With such emblematic, early-American folk art works as the oil-on-canvas portrait *Miss Van Alen* (circa 1735) by "The Gansevoort Limner", the first section of "Outliers" will show how, during the early twentieth century, such self-taught art-makers' works influenced American artists when modernism was still young – the painter Florine Stettheimer or the sculptor Elie Nadelman, for example, who in their own art adopted "primitivised", faux-naïf styles. (Many modernists already had digested Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque's Cubist experiments of the 1910s, which had been influenced by African tribal art.)

This section of the exhibition will also feature self-taught artists' works that Barr, in his early years at the Museum of Modern Art, presented alongside those of such

"modern primitives" as Henri Rousseau and Séraphine Louis. Barr appreciatively showed paintings by Horace Pippin, John Kane and Morris Hirshfield, and wood carvings by Patrociño Barela.

The second section of the exhibition will reveal that, by the late 1960s, the civil rights, feminist, and antiwar movements in the United States forced the media, political establishment, and social institutions to begin considering the ways in which many Americans were disenfranchised from the social, cultural, political, and economic mainstream on account of their race, ethnicity, class, or sex. They were marginalised "others" in a society that prized conformity. However, artists like the Chicago Imagists (Jim Nutt, Gladys Nilsson, Roger Brown and others) appreciated makers of culture from those margins and their creations – comic books, blues music, folk and outsider art, circus banners, commercial printing. Graduates of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, the Imagists made funky paintings and other works filled with warmth and humour that contrasted with the cool, ironic vibe of East Coast Pop Art.

This section of the exhibition will also look back at "Black Folk Art in America, 1930–1980", a show that opened at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, in 1982. Featuring works made by self-taught, African-American artists of the Deep South of the United States, such as James "Son Ford" Thomas, Sister Gertrude Morgan and Sam



above: Judith Scott, *Untitled*, 1993, fibre and found objects, overall: 21 x 16 x 16 ins. / 53.34 x 40.64 x 40.64 cm, courtesy of The Museum of Everything



above: Lee Godie, *Prince Charming*, n.d., paint, ink, and gelatin silver print on canvas, 28.75 x 18.75 ins. / 73 x 47.6 cm, Don Howlett and Lisa Stone

Doyle, this exhibition was both revelatory and controversial. While observers from the mainstream art world regarded such art-makers as isolated, outsider visionaries, anthropologists and folk art specialists traced the historic roots of their varied forms of artistic expression to their ancestral African and Southern regional traditions; they viewed their artworks in the context of such a heritage.

The last section of the exhibition will examine how, in recent years, hierarchical distinctions between the works of trained and self-taught artists seem to have become less pronounced or significant. Celebrating such a spirit of inclusiveness, this part of the exhibition places colourful quilts by the craftswomen of Gee's Bend, Alabama, and by Rosie Lee Tompkins (the artist's name of Effie Mae Howard), near bold, Postminimalist abstractions in various media by Alan Shields and Mary Heilmann.

Elsewhere, the self-taught Judith Scott's mysterious, yarn-covered object-bundles are paired with the trained artist Jessica Stockholder's bright, mixed-media works and Nancy Shaver's found-object assemblages. Also, outsider Eugene Von Bruenchenhein's erotic photos of his wife and muse, Marie, and the Chicago autodidact Lee Godie's embellished photo self-portraits will be seen alongside the postmodernist photographer Cindy Sherman's iconic "Untitled Film Stills" of the late 1970s, in which she donned different outfits and impersonated big-screen actresses in

black-and-white photos evoking familiar movie genres.

Cooke suggested that the varied dialogues that will be discernible between the works on display, made in the recent past by schooled and unschooled artists, will emerge from "certain materials and practices, or certain tropes or themes" they might have in common. She said, "It's about looking at specific dynamics that emerge when you put works into conversation that are concerned in different ways, from different perspectives, with similar ideas."

Savouring the artistic energies such juxtapositions can unleash, Cooke suggested, is far more interesting than keeping score of which exhibitions happen to display the works of trained and untrained artists at the same time. She added, projecting this probing exhibition's central theme into art's current, trend-conscious, money-chasing, global-audience moment, "I think the question of what gets shown in institutions, and why, is very urgent – right now."

"Outliers and American Vanguard Art",
National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC,
January 28–May 13, 2018.

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